Culture Shock

Study Abroad Training

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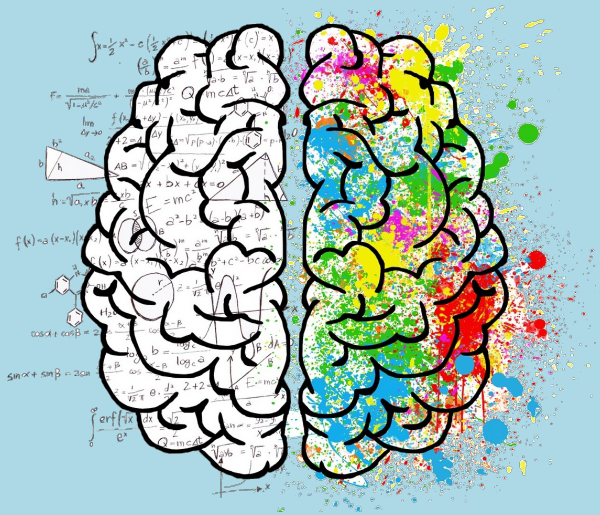
2018–2025

Three kinds of beliefs

Universal

Cultural

Personal



What kind of belief is the action or idea? Universal, cultural, or personal?

1. Sleep with the window open.
2. Run from dangerous animals.
3. Snakes are evil.
4. Men hold doors for women.
5. Respect the elderly.
6. Eat regularly.
7. Like spicy food.
8. Feel sad when a family member dies.
9. Prefer soccer to reading a book.
10. Eat with a fork, spoon, and knife.
11. Strangers are scary.
12. Give people presents on their birthday.

Adapted from Cultural Distinctions from the School for International Studies at University of the Pacific.

Suggested answers

Universal

- Run from dangerous animals.
- Eat regularly.
- Feel sad when a family member dies.

Cultural

- Snakes are evil.
- Men hold doors for women.
- Respect the elderly.
- Eat with a fork, spoon, and knife.
- Strangers are scary.
- Give people presents on their birthday.

Personal

- Sleep with the windows open.
- Like spicy food.
- Prefer soccer to reading a book.

Match the country and the custom.

1. The most common Christmas present is a book.
2. People usually point to things with their thumb.
3. At weddings, people used to spit on the bride.
4. Many cemeteries are also parks where people meet each other and hang out.
5. When you pay at a restaurant, add 15%-20% extra.
6. Wearing shoes inside is not normal.
7. It’s normal to be late.

Malaysia Japan Denmark Mexico Iceland USA Greece

Possible answers

1. The most common Christmas present is a book. Iceland
2. People usually point to things with their thumb. Malaysia
3. At weddings, people used to spit on the bride. Greece
4. Many cemeteries are also parks where people meet each other and hang out. Denmark
5. When you pay at a restaurant, add 15%-20% extra. USA
6. Wearing shoes inside is not normal. Japan
7. It’s normal to be late. Mexico

Culture Shock

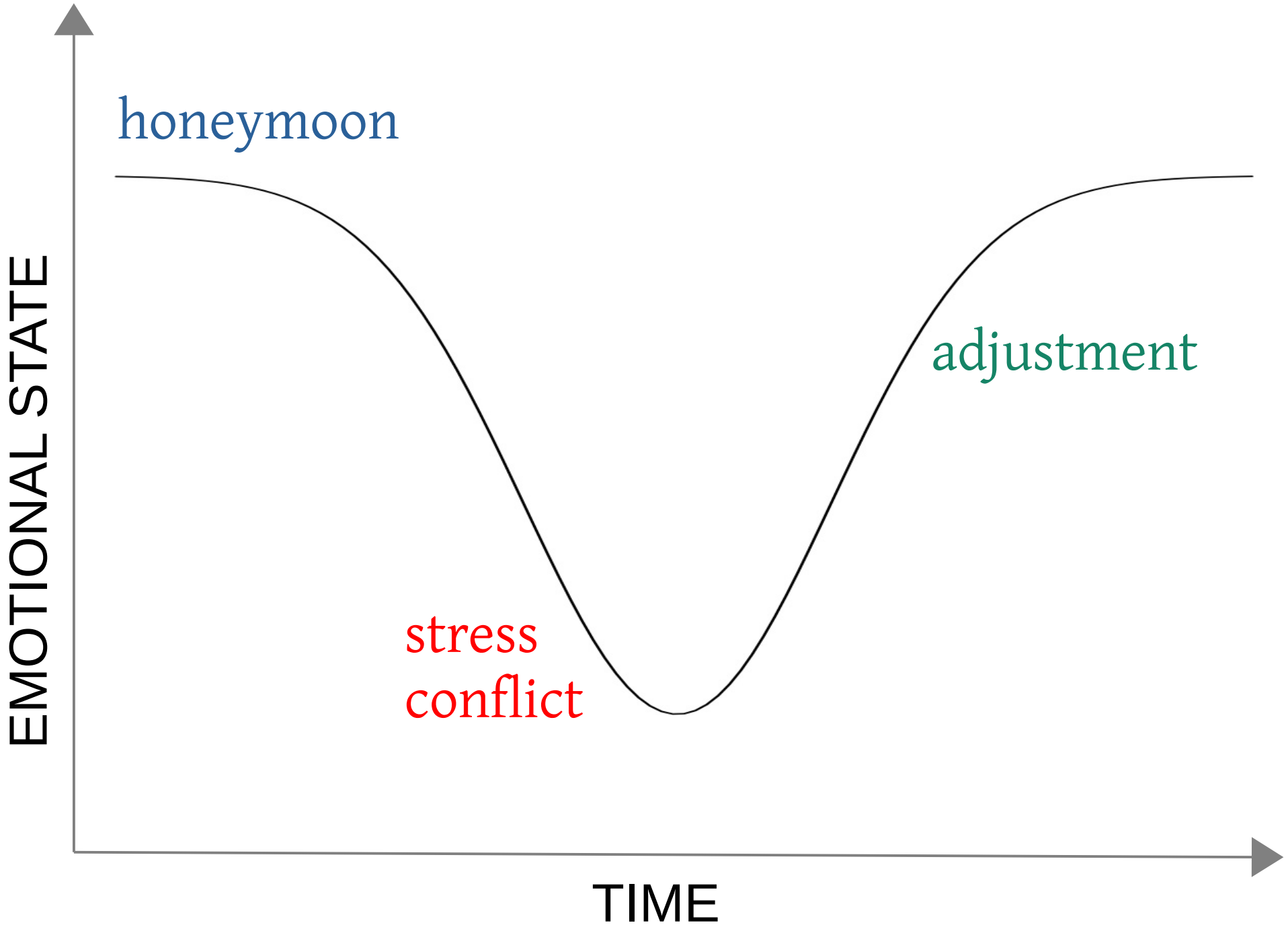
‘cross-cultural adjustment stress’

(Weaver, G.R. 1994)

tired, unhappy, sick, irritated at host culture, self doubt, etc.

I LOVE IT HERE! FIGHT ON!
HOLLYWOOD
NO ONE UNDERSTANDS ME. EVERYTHING IS SO DIFFERENT...
OH IT'S NOT BAD HERE AFTER ALL. I EVEN KIND OF LIKE IT!
CULTURE SHOCK

Photo credit: Shelley Xia, USC.


honeymoon
adjustment
stress
conflict
EMOTIONAL STATE
TIME

What things can you do to adjust?

Copying Culture

If you're living abroad, do you copy the local people, or do you act like you would back home? Here are some situations…

Suppose you’re living in Riyadh. This month it’s Ramadan. Many of your local friends are fasting. This means they don’t eat any food during daylight hours for a month. They ask you to fast, too. They’re all Muslim, but you aren’t.

Suppose you're visiting Jeju for spring vacation. You stop by a local restaurant to get a bowl of soup. The local people all leave the bowl on the table, and they lean forward to eat. You, however, usually pick up your soup bowl.

Suppose you're living in Paris. You go to Ippudo for lunch with your Japanese roommate. You slurp noodles while eating ramen, and the other guests stop and look at you like you're weird.

Suppose you’re living in Yokohama. A couple of friends from abroad are visiting, and the three of you are on the train. Your two friends are talking loudly for several minutes. One man sitting nearby gets up, walks down to the far end of the car, and sits down.

Surprising Stories

Sometimes you do something that feels normal to you, but other people react as though you did something strange. It could be a word, gesture, or action. The situation gets weird, but you don’t know why.

Let’s look at some real examples of people studying and living abroad. Can you guess what happened?

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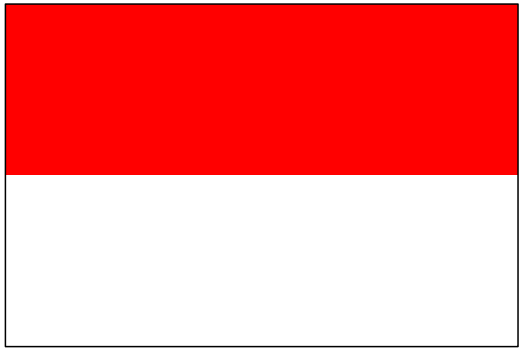
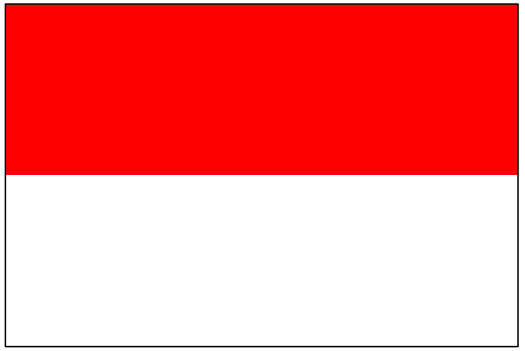
Indonesia Incident



(Female, 20 years old) This is when I lived in Bali. I was talking to my friend, a local young prince. I had to return to my village, but before leaving, I asked the prince if I could take a picture together with him. A king from another village was visiting, and I asked if he would join the picture, too. I moved to my left to make room for him. Everyone became tense, and the servant refused to take the picture. Why not?

Adapted from What's Up with Culture from the School for International Studies at University of the Pacific.

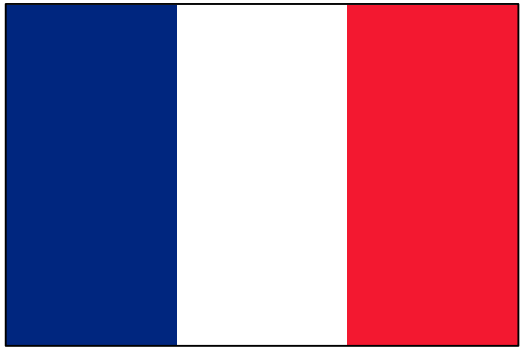
Indonesia Explained



(Female, 20 years old) In Bali, status of a person is very important. Also, the spiritual center of the universe is Mt. Agung. People who are older, or of higher status, should be sitting or standing closer to Mt. Agung. When I asked the king to stand to my side, I was putting him in a low position, so the servant could not take the photograph.

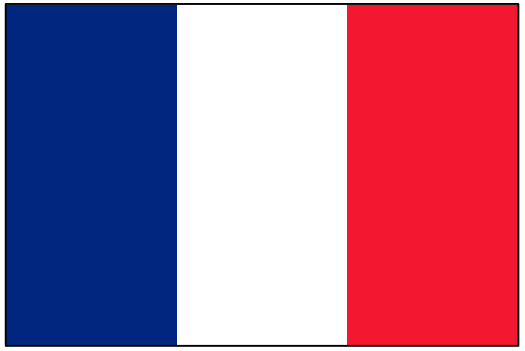
Created by Addicted04. CC BY-SA 3.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:France_on_the_globe_(France_centered).svg

France Incident



(Female, 39 years old) We were living in France, and I wanted to go shopping for fish and vegetables. I went to the street market, found some vegetables, and brought them up to the store owner. He said something quickly in French that I couldn’t understand. I asked, “Pardon?” Then he said it again, but I didn’t catch it, so I asked again, “Pardon?” Then the man started yelling at me! It was so embarrassing, and I ran away.

France Explained



(Female, 39 years old) This is a common thing, but only if you know it. The question he was asking was, “Et avec ça?” It means, “Anything else?” The employee thought that I had bad hearing, so he spoke louder and louder. My problem wasn’t the volume, but the speed. He didn’t know, and he was trying to be helpful! It didn’t work, but I don’t blame him.

If you live abroad long enough, you're going to have unexpected experiences. Sometimes it's something related to language, which you would expect, but at other times it's something totally unpredictable.

Culture & Shock Reading

Can you recommend any food that a traveler should definitely try if they visit your town?

(Janelle) Auckland, New Zealand, offers a wide variety of foods that have international influences with a kiwi twist. One of the most important things to know is that a true kiwi dish is humble. It might not look too fancy but it tastes delicious. I recommend going to one of the many night markets held in Auckland. There you will come across a traditional Maori hangi. A hangi consists of meat and vegetables covered and cooked in the ground. The meat, often pork or lamb, is served with potatoes, pumpkin and kumara (sweet potato).

You can feel culture shock even within a country. Have you experienced it?

(Geffel) Yes. When I visited Manila, I was surprised that if you don't give the exact fare, taxi drivers usually won't give you your change because they expect it to be a “tip”. In my city, taxi drivers give you the exact change without being asked. Another thing, when I went to Cebu, I had a very awkward encounter with a male friend. He was talking about his achievements, and I told him “naibog ko nimo da” which means “I envy you” in my dialect. However, in the Cebu dialect, what I said meant “I like you”!

Write about a time that you've experienced the honeymoon phase.

(Rachel) I experienced the honeymoon phase when I studied abroad in Italy. I've always loved Italian food, and I couldn't wait to study abroad in Venice and eat delicious food. At first, I loved eating a different kind of pasta every day: pasta with tomatoes and basil, pasta with cheese, pasta with olive oil and peppers, and more. After a few weeks, I was sick of pasta! I craved Mexican food, but there were no good Mexican restaurants in Venice. When I came home, the first thing I did was go to a Mexican restaurant. Too much of a good thing can be a bad thing.

Do you strongly identify with a specific culture?

(Doug) My cultural identity is all kinds of mixed up because I've lived in many different countries and cities, and my parents were not born in my home town, or even my own state. How do you count? I've lived in Japan since 2007, which is a third of my life. I speak Japanese and have many local friends. On the other hand, at home I almost always cook American food, and I mostly subscribe to American YouTubers. Cultural identify for expats is a giant question mark.

Culture & Shock Writing

Answer 4+ sentences.

1. Would you eat noodles noisily if you were in the U.S.?
2. Can you recommend any food that a traveler from abroad should definitely try if they visit your town?
3. Have you experienced culture shock before?
4. Have you ever explained to someone that their actions were impolite, when it was obvious they just didn’t know?
5. Write about a time that you’ve experienced the honeymoon phase. This can happen on short vacations, not just long trips.
6. Do you strongly identify with a specific culture? Explain it.
7. If you were in Saudi Arabia during Ramadan, would you fast?

See Also

- This is how Japanese people eat noodle. Takashi Yamaura. YouTube. 2013.
- Cultural Distinctions. Dr. Bruce La Brack. University of the Pacific. 2000-2003.
- Why we need to embrace culture shock. Kristofer Gilmour. TEDXTownsville. 2016.
- 11 Surprising Customs from Around the World. Lily Cichanowicz. Culture Trip. 2022.